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## **A ‘Most Fruitful Period’? The North East District Communist Party and the Popular Front, 1935-9.\***

**Lewis Mates**

The Labour Party’s growth and eventual hegemony in the north east during the inter-war period has been reflected by the dominance the topic has enjoyed in the pages of the North East Labour History Society’s journal. Though understandable, the lack of attention paid to the Communist Party (CP) has meant that an important aspect of that supremacy has remained unexplored. This article will attempt to address this imbalance by examining the CP in the region and assessing its influence in various important labour movement organisations in the popular front period, 1935-9.<sup>1</sup>

The popular front marked a sharp change of direction from the previous policy, the sectarian ‘class against class’ or ‘third period’. Imposed by the Communist International (Comintern) in 1928, this policy demanded that communists regard the ‘social fascist’ Social Democrats as their greatest enemy. However, a rethink was forced with Hitler’s seizure of power in Germany in January 1933, which was ascribed by many on the left to the split in the German working class between the communists and socialists. So, the ‘class against class’ policy was gradually discarded and replaced by a renewed communist effort to co-operate with other parties against fascism. Initially, co-operation was limited to the ‘working class’ parties, but this soon broadened out to include all anti-fascists. The popular front strategy itself was pioneered by communists in France, where an indigenous fascist threat led to the French CP adopting a programme for an alliance of all progressive and democratic forces under the banner of a ‘people’s front’ by October 1934. The

‘Dimitrov resolution’, passed at the Seventh World Communist Congress in summer 1935, brought the international communist movement into line with these developments. This new strategy seemed to yield dividends as popular front governments were elected in Spain in February 1936 and in France three months later.<sup>2</sup>

In Britain, the urgent need was to defeat the National Government which, with its developing appeasement policies of the late thirties, was seen as pro-fascist. A popular front government, led by Labour but including Liberals, would commit Britain to building up a peace block of countries, an alliance with France, Russia, America and other democracies, which could halt fascist expansionism. This popular front period, which saw, amongst others, the extensive campaigns to support the desperate struggle of the Spanish Republican government against a military revolt supported by Hitler and Mussolini, has been deemed ‘the most fruitful period in the history of the British left and of the Communist Party in particular’.<sup>3</sup> But how fruitful was it for the CP in the north east of England?

### **CP Membership and Its Geographical Distribution**

Two years into the popular front period proper, in July 1937, a worried Newcastle trade union official reported that the CP on Tyneside was making ‘rapid progress’ in gaining membership.<sup>4</sup> If the union official was not deliberately scare-mongering, they need not have worried too much. Though there is some discrepancy regarding the precise membership figures, they were hardly impressive. The maximum figure of 550 North East District members in 1938 represented only 3.5 percent of the national CP membership of 15,750 for that year.<sup>5</sup> The district compared very unfavourably with another region of a similar size and socio-economic makeup,

South Wales, which had 961 members in 1938.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the north east's membership did not even compare favourably with what it had been a decade previously. In 1926, at the peak of its influence (due to its more militant stand on the coal strike) regional CP membership had rocketed. Though the vast majority of new recruits soon left the party, the membership figure of around 750 by September 1927 was still almost half as much again as the mid-1938 figure.<sup>7</sup>

Particular geographical areas of communist weakness can be highlighted. There was, for example, no CP organisation in the west end of Newcastle in the mid-thirties. Thus Johnny Walsh, who had become disenchanted with the Labour League of Youth (LLY) and the Independent Labour Party's (ILP) Guild of Youth as they were 'only talk shops', had to remain in the Labour Party for eighteen months more than he would have liked.<sup>8</sup> However, the classic example of a very weak CP branch was that of Jarrow and Hebburn, the notorious unemployment black-spot which had, according to Ellen Wilkinson, only seven members in the thirties.<sup>9</sup> Wilkinson's claim was corroborated by a contemporary young activist, Barry Sparke, who claimed that in the late thirties there were only eight or nine people in the branch.<sup>10</sup> Sparke attributed the diminutive size of the CP in Jarrow to the strength of catholicism in the town. Catholics, of course, were generally repelled by what was an avowedly atheist organisation. The presence of 230,394 catholics in Hexham and Newcastle Diocese was undoubtedly a significant obstacle for the CP.<sup>11</sup> Though Jarrow was the most extreme example, there were strong concentrations of catholics in other areas of the region, most notably Gateshead and Sunderland. In Gateshead, there were enough catholics in the Labour Party to form a group on Gateshead council and split the party over issues like the provision of birth control advice.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, roman catholic parentage did not necessarily preclude an individual from becoming a communist. In fact Barry Sparke himself partly fell into this category as his father was a member of a Tyneside Irish family whilst his mother was the eldest daughter of a Protestant pitman's family.<sup>13</sup> In highlighting this overall weakness in terms of CP membership in the district, it should be pointed out that, as thirties communist activist Frank Graham noted of the region, 'most towns and villages had a small [CP] branch at least'.<sup>14</sup> And, of course, some localities had relatively strong branches. The size of Frank Graham's own branch, Sunderland, was such that it recruited twenty volunteers to fight against Franco in the communist-organised International Brigade. This was the largest individual town contingent in the region, and this from a town with a substantial catholic vote.<sup>15</sup>

### **Communist Influence in the Wider Labour Movement: 'Cryptos' and 'Fellow Travellers'**

Though the north east CP remained numerically weak by mid-1938, it might still have exercised influence well beyond its size, which partly depended on the position and standing of communists within the wider labour movement. One way in which influence within the 'official' [i.e. non-communist] movement could be exerted was by those who were members of both the Communist and Labour Parties. This was prohibited under Labour Party rules and, due to the secrecy required, it is difficult to identify individuals who were card-carrying members of both parties. Ellen Wilkinsons' observations on Jarrow CP are important in this context, as she claimed that five of the seven communists in the town 'also held cards in the Labour Party'.<sup>16</sup> Other evidence suggests strong communist influence. In 1936-7, a dispute in Jarrow Labour Party and Trades Council (LP&TC) led to

the expulsion of several Labour councillors who then claimed that the split was due to 'communists' within Jarrow Labour Party.<sup>17</sup>

This impression of communist infiltration of Jarrow Labour was, however, refuted by Barry Sparke. He claimed that there was only one 'crypto' in the Jarrow Labour Party in the thirties, William Rounce.<sup>18</sup> However, it was quite conceivable that Rounce had joined many ex-communists on the Jarrow LP&TC executive who were still favourable to communist policies. This was implied in June 1937 by the Labour mayor who, whilst denying that there were any communists in the party, added that some may have been CP members before joining Labour.<sup>19</sup> Either Rounce had a very persuasive personality or there were other 'fellow travellers' in Jarrow LP&TC as the organisation supported several communist causes in the late thirties.<sup>20</sup> Yet, communist influence in Jarrow did not stretch to the divisional party, which did not, for example, support the popular front in 1939 (unlike the admittedly lukewarm support provided by its MP, Ellen Wilkinson).<sup>21</sup>

Though there must have been other significant 'cryptos' in the region, most of the influence the CP exercised within the north east Labour Party was through those who supported the CP's 'line' in the period. Presumably, many of these individuals were in the Labour Party rather than the CP for practical rather than ideological reasons, it being far more difficult, and, at times, impossible to get elected to a local council or trade union position as an overt communist. Henry Bolton, Andy, Steve and Emmie Lawther, all important 'official' figures in Blaydon Labour Party, were good examples of this.<sup>22</sup> Through them, Blaydon Labour Party became the conduit through which the north east CP exercised most influence.<sup>23</sup> Thus the 'official' labour movement in Blaydon provided extensive support for the 1936 Hunger March, and there was united front activity on Spain, in various guises,

throughout the period.<sup>24</sup> However, even Blaydon Divisional Labour Party (DLP) was not completely dominated by communist ‘fellow travellers’, and there was conflict between the wings of the movement, over, for example, the role of Blaydon Socialist Sunday School in autumn 1936.<sup>25</sup>

### **Communist Influence in Other North East Labour Parties, Trades Councils and Joint Bodies**

Where, and in what other organisations did the north east CP exercise influence in the popular front period? Of the three types of organisations, the purely ‘industrial’ Trades Councils (like mini-Trades Union Congresses for specific towns or areas) were most susceptible to direct communist penetration and influence, as they were composed of delegates from local trade union branches (who could be communists, or communist sympathisers). Naturally, combined Labour Party and Trades Councils were also susceptible to communism by the same method.

However, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) had acted to curb this potential threat by issuing the notorious ‘Black Circulars’ on 26 October 1934. Circular Sixteen informed Trades Councils that if they had communist or fascist delegates they would no longer be recognised as ‘official’. Trades Council responses to Circular Sixteen revealed the very limited extent of communist activity in north east Trades Councils even before the TUC’s crack-down. There was no communist activity, according to their officials, in Blaydon, Chester-le-Street, Hebburn or Sunderland Trades Councils. Only two, Blyth and Newcastle, reported some contact, and they both claimed to have rebuffed communist proposals for joint activity.<sup>26</sup> Thus, if the CP was to gain in influence in the late thirties, it was operating from a very low position in the region.

One way of gauging influence is to examine support from 'official' movement organisations for the popular front, which was the major policy that differentiated the CP from the Labour Party in the period 1935-9. As support for the popular front (and united front as a first step towards it) involved Labour co-operation with communists, the Labour leadership vigorously opposed both. Thus, while Labour Party and trade union branches supporting these policies were not necessarily under the influence of the CP, it can be said that they shared some common political ground; that they were, for those years, part of the same general 'constituency'. Of course, this approach only gauges what was momentary support for rapidly, and radically, changing communist policies. But, as this discussion is limited to the popular front period, comment on the longer-term influence of the CP is not necessary here.

Probably the next most significant locality to Blaydon and Jarrow in terms of CP influence was Newcastle, and especially Newcastle Trades Council. Its claim that it had rebuffed communist approaches was in some senses disingenuous, as at its very heart was Tom Aisbitt, the only other identifiable crypto-communist in the north east in this period.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Newcastle Trades Council figured heavily in almost all left wing activity of this period.<sup>28</sup> Potentially, Aisbitt's position made the CP very powerful within Trades Councils in the region. This was because Newcastle Trades Council was by far the largest of the fourteen organisations affiliated to the North East Federation of Trades Councils (NEFTC) and Aisbitt was the Newcastle Trades Council delegate and, briefly, NEFTC president.<sup>29</sup> However, this predominance in size did not allow Newcastle Trades Council to dictate NEFTC decisions as each Council, regardless of its size, had a single delegate with one vote on the NEFTC executive. In practice, Newcastle Trades Council's influence was very limited: for example, in Spring 1936 Aisbitt failed to



secure NEFTC support for the popular front Tyneside Joint Peace Council (TJPC), due to NEFTC delegates' fears of communist involvement in the Peace Council.<sup>30</sup>

By April 1938 two of the four Newcastle constituencies had young left wing Prospective Parliamentary Candidates (PPCs, Arthur Blenkinsop in Newcastle East and Lyall Wilkes, Newcastle Central), who appeared to be sympathetic towards the CP. Both supported Cripps in 1939. Wilkes had flirted with the Left Book Club in 1938 and, unlike Blenkinsop, received the endorsement of his DLP over Cripps in 1939. Left wing influence seems to have been slightly less overall in the Newcastle DLPs in 1939 than in 1938, however, as Cripps did not secure the support of two DLPs that had been pro-popular front the previous year, namely Newcastle East and North DLPs. Moreover, Wilkes and Blenkinsop did not really appear to represent the majority attitude of their DLPs, except for a couple of instances when Newcastle Labour Party representatives supported NUWM (National Unemployed Workers' Movement, a communist - run organisation) initiatives 1937-9.<sup>31</sup> Thus, when communists made several offers of electoral support in east Newcastle in October 1937, Labour reacted with open and very public hostility. In spring 1938, the CP had enough support to organise a deputation of Newcastle Labour Party members to meet the city leadership regarding communist proposals for a joint campaign with Labour, but insufficient influence for this to amount to anything.<sup>32</sup>

The next most important area for the CP was Gateshead, where the party exercised a small and fluctuating degree of influence in Gateshead LP&TC. Though there was general Labour hostility to the CP and NUWM before 1937, this did not prevent some members of Gateshead LP&TC from supporting the 1937 Unity Campaign.<sup>33</sup> It is likely, though, that Unity Campaign supporters were, in the main, also Socialist League members (the Socialist League nationally being one of the

signatories to the campaign).<sup>34</sup> Even then, not all Socialist League members supported joint activity with the CP. This included, most importantly, the main organiser in the region, Ruth Dodds.<sup>35</sup> The popular front received far less support. Only Bart Kelly, Gateshead's Labour PPC, supported the United Peace Alliance in summer 1938.<sup>36</sup> Kelly also heaped praise on the communists in September 1938, when he was ousted as PPC.<sup>37</sup> However, his ejection was a consequence of his lack of financial backing rather than his communist sympathies. Another high-profile Gateshead LP&TC member who openly praised the CP in 1938 was Mayor Pickering, but his attitude remained unpopular in the party and there was very little support for Cripps' popular front in 1939.<sup>38</sup>

Wansbeck DLP, in Northumberland, contained one of the most high-profile pro-Soviet Labour Party members in the thirties, Sir Charles Trevelyan. Wansbeck DLP delegate to Labour annual conferences in the late thirties, Trevelyan's stance on issues such as Spain, which caused the national leadership a good deal of trouble, seemed well supported. Though some sections of Wansbeck DLP condemned the National Executive Committee's (NEC) disaffiliation of the Socialist League due to its involvement in the Unity Campaign in 1937, Trevelyan's position did not reflect a wider communist influence within the party.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Trevelyan's influence was insufficient for him to gain his party's support for the popular front in 1938 or 1939. Newburn local Labour Party (LLP) seemed pro-popular front, but it was clear that the majority of the party were far less well disposed towards the CP than was Trevelyan, and this did not change during the popular front period.<sup>40</sup>

After this, there were a few localities that saw even lower levels of communist influence. In County Durham, Durham DLP supported communist affiliation in

early August 1936, but demonstrated that this did not necessarily translate into involvement in united front activity with the CP. Moves in 1938 to get the party to support the popular front came from the communist Hetton (Eppleton) Lodge (in May 1938) and in October from Hetton LLP. These moves failed, and, in 1939, Durham DLP endorsed Cripps' expulsion from the Labour Party.<sup>41</sup> B.E. Naylor's claim that 'no permanent roots, or tradition', were established by communist activity in Seaham division, after it concentrated efforts there during the Dawdon miner's lockout in 1929, and in the 1929 and 1931, general elections requires slight qualification.<sup>42</sup> This is because a communist, George Burdess, was chairperson of Dawdon Lodge in the late thirties. This position obviously gave Burdess some influence within the lodge, though this was limited. For example, Burdess' lodge nominated him as a communist candidate for the Spring 1937 council elections, but also nominated four other members of the lodge executive as his Labour opponents. The four Labour candidates were elected, which suggests both that Burdess' influence within the lodge and the popularity of communists outside it was minimal.<sup>43</sup> The Labour MP from 1935, Emmanuel Shinwell, appeared at times to be relatively left wing but he only very briefly flirted with the united and popular fronts. Overall, most of what Shinwell said about communists was not complimentary, and his attitude appeared to be the shared by most in Seaham DLP, which opposed communist affiliation to Labour in 1936.<sup>44</sup>

Apart from a couple of individuals, such as left wing miner's leader councillor Will Pearson, the CP lacked any influence in South Shields LP&TC.<sup>45</sup> The organisation had taken 'strong action' to enforce the Black Circular 1934-5 and this hostility to communists did not change during the popular front period. South Shields LP&TC supported the United Peace Alliance and opposed Cripps' expulsion, but this simply reveals that, despite the fact that the popular front

necessitated an alliance with communists (in most of its versions, at least), this was insufficient to deter all those who desired an alliance with Liberals.<sup>46</sup>

Across the river Tyne in North Shields and Tynemouth, the CP was a relatively strong force as the Labour Party was weak.<sup>47</sup> However, the Moderates (i.e. Liberals or Conservatives, depending on the locality) in the town provided more support for communist ventures than did the Labour Party or Trades Council.<sup>48</sup> In 1939, Tynemouth Labour Party supported Cripps, an important development as it had not previously supported the popular front. Tynemouth was a good example of the kind of party that would be expected to support the popular front, regardless of poor relations with communists, as both operated in strongly Conservative areas. So again, this is not necessarily evidence that communist influence was growing within the Labour Party in the town.<sup>49</sup> The only event suggesting that the CP had some influence in the area came in early January 1937, when a communist was brought in by striking North Shields trawlermen and elected their leader after the Transport & General Workers' Union (TGWU) refused to recognise their strike. Though this development alienated some the strike, begun on 4 January and ending in defeat nineteen days later, nevertheless suggested that communists were, in times of strife, not necessarily seen by rank-and-file trade unionists as pariahs. However, this event was unique in the region and only occurred at all because the official movement refused to support the strike. Vitaly, it appears that this prominent communist involvement in a trade union struggle did not make Labour in the town more receptive to the communists, and thus brought no tangible political gains for the CP.<sup>50</sup>

### **Communist Influence in North East Trades Unions**

The other 'Black Circular', Circular Seventeen, required unions to ensure that communists did not hold official positions within their structures. Unlike Circular Sixteen, the TUC could not enforce it, and it was ignored by many unions who were angered by the TUC's attempted incursion into their internal operating procedures. Thus, the CP had more opportunities to gain positions of influence within the trade unions. In practice, though, this does not appear to have occurred to any significant extent in the north east.

In terms of size (around 125,000 members) and influence, the Durham Miners' Association (DMA) was the most important trade union in the north east. Therefore, if the CP was to exercise any degree of influence within the regional trade union movement it was incumbent upon it to have a significant presence within the DMA. Theoretically, the CP *could* have exercised a reasonable degree of influence within the DMA, due to the Durham coalfield journals it published in the thirties. The *DMA Monthly Journal* was launched in April 1938 and, whilst not 'official', it did have the 'blessing' of the DMA executive. Communist involvement was revealed by the fact that George Burdess (of Dawdon) published it. Though not an out-and-out communist propaganda journal, presumably because this would have lost it the DMA's 'blessing', the CP had some input, such as advertising for the communist-run 'People's Bookshop' in Newcastle.<sup>51</sup> The journal also included articles by left wing miners such as George Harvey and Will Lawther, and was still being produced well into the Second World War.<sup>52</sup> An earlier publication, the *Durham Mineworker* of 1934, was produced by the unofficial 'Durham Miners' Campaign Committee', which is likely to have been a communist-inspired organisation too.<sup>53</sup> Production of both of these journals would have shown that the CP could contribute constructively to the development of the union and that its members were competent, trustworthy and useful trade unionists.

As important, the journals went some way in demonstrating that, at least as far as the CP was concerned, the sectarianism and bitterness of the 'class against class' period was over.

An indication of communist influence within DMA lodges during the popular front period is given by lodge votes on resolutions at DMA council meetings, though there were very few occasions in the late thirties when there was a lodge vote on an overtly 'communist' issue. One such occasion was the vote on whether the DMA should support the 1936 Hunger March in autumn 1936. The proposal received 153 votes, and was soundly defeated by a majority of a little over five to one (644 votes were cast against). The only other similar vote in the period came in March 1937, when a Marsden resolution urged the unions to call a general strike if the government refused to supply arms to the Spanish Republic in its fight against Franco. The vote of 158 in favour was almost identical to the early Hunger March vote and was another five-to-one against vote (663 votes were cast against).<sup>54</sup> There were no DMA lodge votes on the united or popular fronts, but these two votes suggest that the CP was not in a position to influence a majority lodge vote.

If anything, the CP was more influential on the DMA executive than it was in the lodges. Left wingers Pearson, Tom Pigford, Harvey and others were elected to it for six-month periods in the late thirties.<sup>55</sup> In addition, two newly elected full-time agents, Will Lawther and Sam Watson, were known to be sympathetic to the CP, (though they were not party members). The executive certainly supported the united front, theoretically at least, seconding the proposals for CP affiliation to Labour at the 1936 Miners' Federation (MFGB) conference and, in the form of Will Pearson, called for a united front at the MFGB conference the following year.<sup>56</sup>

However, the only practical united front activity that occurred came in August 1936, when the DMA invited the CP to attend its anti-Means Test demonstrations. The political fall-out created by Conservatives in the aftermath of the demonstrations helped sour the atmosphere and so, only a few months later, the executive decided against supporting the NUWM Hunger March. A communist claim that only one vote determined the executive's decision cannot be verified from the DMA minutes, but it appears unlikely given the way that the issue was dealt with by the executive at DMA council.<sup>57</sup> So, despite having a theoretical commitment to the united front in 1937, there was no official DMA support for the Unity Campaign. Sam Watson was the only DMA agent involved (not even the other left wing agent, Will Lawther, took part).<sup>58</sup> Clearly, communist influence within the DMA executive was only sufficient to secure paper support for the united front 1936-7, at a time when the Miner's Federation as a whole also supported the proposal. There was no whole-hearted DMA commitment to the united front, thus the union only once, in summer 1936, went beyond theoretical support to practical united front activity.

The DMA executive was even less supportive of the popular front. Only Will Pearson was an overt popular fronter in 1938, and not one full-time DMA official figured. In 1939 Will Lawther and Sam Watson became prominent supporters of Cripps' campaign but there was still no official support for the policy, which contrasted with the earlier united front. The other DMA agents either remained silent or supported the Labour Party NEC against Cripps. The DMA did not reprimand Lawther and Watson, who were permitted to continue supporting Cripps and, as with the United Peace Alliance the year before, resolutions on the topic were not allowed to appear. This minimised division within the union and ensured

that there was no lodge vote. Had there been one, it would surely have been a crushing defeat for Cripps.<sup>59</sup>

The lack of influence the CP had in the DMA was also reflected by the paucity of Durham miners on the district committee. Only George Reay, of Boldon Lodge, had an executive position in a Durham lodge.<sup>60</sup> The CP had had more influential figures within the DMA but, by the late thirties, they had lost their relative positions of influence.<sup>61</sup> This was true of communist councillor Jim Ancrum. He was nominated as chair of Felling Lodge in 1931 but Robson, the DMA secretary of the time, wrote to the lodge claiming that communists could not stand. This false allegation apparently 'confused' the miners and Ancrum was narrowly defeated.<sup>62</sup> Other members of the district committee in the late thirties were also ex-miners. George Short worked in the mines until 1926, and then became a labourer. Returning from the Soviet Union in 1931, he started as a full time worker for the CP on Teesside. In 1938, 'after consultation with the party' he got a job in industry.<sup>63</sup> Charlie Woods, though a miner for most of his life, worked intermittently outside mining for short periods in unskilled or semi-skilled work in the building and engineering industries.<sup>64</sup> Crypto-communist Tom Aisbitt's first trade union position was chairperson of Team Valley miners, County Durham. He then became chairperson of South Pelaw Lodge and was associated with the Industrial Unionist movement in the Durham coalfield. By 1936 he was an Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers (ASW), member.<sup>65</sup>

Another measure of the lack of communist influence in the DMA is the fact that only a handful of the 121 in the north east contingent of the International Brigade were from the Durham coalfield. (Having contacts who were communists was important for those who wished to volunteer). The trade union membership of



communists who volunteered from the region (many originally from the north east volunteered from elsewhere, normally the south east where they had moved for work) gives some indication of where the CP's relative strengths were: primarily in the general and municipal workers' union (NUGMW), with lesser numbers in the TGWU, seamen (NUS), Northumberland miners (NMA) and shop workers' unions (NUDAW).<sup>66</sup> Out of these, communist influence was perhaps greatest in the NMA, which behaved in a similar way to the DMA. It supported communist affiliation to Labour in 1936 and there were NMA delegates at a united front Spain meeting in September 1936 and at the first major regional Unity Campaign meeting in March 1937. It, too, did not provide any support for the popular front, and none of its main officials appeared especially pro-CP.<sup>67</sup> The most significant communist in the union was William Allan, chairperson of Cambois Lodge. Though the regional NUGMW leadership, especially Yarwood and councillor J. Middleton (president of the district), were open anti-communists, the CP or Labour left appeared to control a handful of NUGMW branches.<sup>68</sup> In contrast, the district committee of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU) appeared to be slightly left leaning (the AEU nationally supported CP affiliation to Labour in 1936). William Hepple seemed the most left wing member of the district committee, as he figured at a Unity Campaign meeting in March 1937 (and there were other AEU delegates on the platform).<sup>69</sup> The most prominent communist in the regional NUS was Alex Robson, based in North Shields.<sup>70</sup> Finally, as mentioned above, there were the crypto-communists Aisbitt and Rounce in the ASW. Thus, whilst the CP was particularly weak in the DMA, which was important given the union's size and influence, it was not significantly influential in any other union in the region, and this despite the claim by the worried Newcastle trade union official in July 1937 that the CP 'is increasing its influence in the unions'.<sup>71</sup> If its influence was increasing, then it was doing so from a very low base. One problem for many

communists was unemployment, which effectively ruled them out of exercising influence in trade unions. This was the case for important Blyth communist Bob Elliott who was an unemployed miner for a long period prior to his departure for Spain in 1937 where he was killed fighting in the International Brigade.<sup>72</sup>

### **The 'Failure' of the North East CP in the Popular Front Period**

The main indicator of the failure of the north east CP to increase its influence within the wider labour movement and beyond in the popular front period is revealed by its membership figures. As noted at the outset, the membership in mid-1938 compared unfavourably with other similar regions of Britain and even with membership a decade previously in the north east. Worse was to come as, far from increasing in the year leading up to war (as South Wales membership did, to 1,056 by May 1939), membership figures in the north east actually *decreased*. This unwelcome development did not escape the notice of the CP's national leadership. William Rust, in a report on party organisation to the Central Committee in March 1939, noted that the north east had lost fifty members and highlighted Newcastle as one of the 'weak areas from the point of view of the party'.<sup>73</sup> The north east representative Hymie Lee could do little but accept that on Tyneside, 'a great industrial area', the party was 'extremely weak'.<sup>74</sup>

The only other decline was in Scotland, which already had a large membership. Thus, whilst a decline there was disappointing, it was not disastrous. Equally, a small increase in South Wales would perhaps be expected as the party was already strong there. Rust also noted that in South Wales the syndicalist dimension of political culture meant that the average communist did not attach as much importance to the party as to the union.<sup>75</sup> The north east did not have these

excuses: the membership decline was a disaster for the regional party. Already relatively low in mid-1938, it seemed inconceivable that the figure could do anything but increase. Somehow, the North East District had managed the apparently impossible.

### **Why Did the CP 'Fail' in the North East in the Popular Front Period?**

The main reason the CP failed so badly in the north east in the popular front period is bound up with the long-term development of the Labour Party in the region.

Labour support in the north east had grown from Methodism, trade unions and co-operatives, with Labour building on Liberal foundations. The CP could not gain a foothold.<sup>76</sup> In this sense the region was similar to West Yorkshire: in both regions the Labour Party had 'established a dominant position amongst the industrial working class and had become the main vehicle for workers to express their political voice'.<sup>77</sup> In addition, and similar to Lancashire, the strong non-conformist and catholic elements of the north east populace were alienated by communist atheism.<sup>78</sup> Thus, George Aitken, reporting on the district in November 1936, recognised that it had 'been looked upon as one of the most backward districts of the Party for many years' and he used, with some justification, the adjective 'backward' several more times in his report to describe the north east.<sup>79</sup>

The reasons for the nation-wide Labour hostility towards communism are broadly applicable to the north east. These were, according to Fenner Brockway, disruptive communist tactics which had caused labour movement leaders a lot of nuisance over many years; a dislike of the dictatorship in Soviet Russia; distrust of communists due to their reputation for double-dealing and disloyalty, and opposition to the imposition of communist policy from abroad.<sup>80</sup> Many of these

aspects were expressed in a speech by John Yarwood, a north east NUGMW official, in July 1937. Yarwood castigated communists as ‘glib-tongued tools of Moscow’ who, he claimed, were ‘responsible for recent dissension’ in the north east labour movement: ‘the trouble-makers in our midst must be dealt with with [sic.] an iron hand [...] and sent back to their sponsor to admit the ignominious failure of their underhand tactics. What reasonable negotiation could not accomplish, anarchy [sic.] could never do’.<sup>81</sup> Presumably, the majority of those in the official north east labour movement shared Yarwood’s sentiments.

However, there is strikingly little evidence of overt anti-communism in the speeches of north east labour movement activists in the popular front period. Perhaps the ‘threat’ was so negligible in the region that official movement leaders generally did not deem it worthwhile to spend time condemning communists. Certainly, there was no evidence of anti-communists in the labour movement publicly citing the Show Trials in the Soviet Union to reinforce their case against communism, an important factor in undermining communist influence within the labour movement nationally.<sup>82</sup> A diminutive communist presence in the region meant that many in the official labour movement had had little practical experience of communists, especially in the sectarian ‘third period’, which probably would have fortified what the national leadership had said about them. Thus only a few important north east Labour leaders denounced communism between 1935 and 1939, and only one DLP, Bishop Auckland, disciplined members who were involved in the Unity Campaign with communists. Prominent regional Labour figures who were involved in extensive activity with communists, like those in Blaydon, were also left alone. The Labour leadership in the region was either more tolerant of dissent than the national one or was less paranoid about the threat of communism. Of course, it is easier to be tolerant of a potential threat if you do not

regard it as such, or are not even aware of its existence.<sup>83</sup> Another part of the historical problem for the CP was that the left wing within the regional Labour Party was also small. And even part of that did not appear particularly supportive of co-operation with the CP.

Specific developments within the popular front period also served to make things more difficult for the CP. By 1935 the national labour movement leadership had developed an increasingly intolerant attitude to communists (as shown by the 'Black Circulars') and its attitude must have had a significant impact on those of labour movement activists in the region. Moreover, the national leadership was sometimes prepared to take drastic action against dissenters. For example, the TUC 'warned off' Felling Trades Council from being involved in an NUWM conference in spring 1936.<sup>84</sup> The knowledge that they were possibly being scrutinised by their leaders and would be admonished for misdemeanours must have acted to further build antipathy towards communists. Yet the 'control freakery' of the national labour movement leadership depended on a strong degree of rank-and-file loyalty. Generally speaking, loyalty to the official movement as embodied by its national leadership was very strong in the north east. Loyalty meant that national leadership decisions were largely adhered to. Loyalty did *not* mean that labour movement organisations in the region agreed with everything that the national leadership said and did, but it was a factor that kept CP influence small. In his anti-communist speech in July 1937 Yarwood noted that even the CP admitted that 'thanks to [...] loyal membership, they are making little or no progress in our union' [the NUGMW].<sup>85</sup> Even where the CP looked to be making inroads, such as during the North Shields trawlermen's strike of January 1937, respect for communists as trade unionists did not appear to translate into positive support for their policies or an increased degree of communist influence within the wider labour movement.

Hampered by the historic failure of the CP to develop into a vital force in the north east, the party should still have done better in a period which is widely reckoned to have been one of its most successful. Thus part of the explanation for its failure must be the popular front policy itself and the way that it was implemented on the ground. Firstly, it is pertinent to note that the popular front appeared to be generally well supported and systematically implemented by the north east CP. There certainly appeared to have been no internal communist opposition to the policy in the region. As has been shown, in many localities the party made repeated and sustained attempts to encourage joint activity with Labour as the first, and most important, step to the popular front. However, at times certain communist's activities appeared to be aimed at aggravating relations with other prospective allies. For example, Burdess' behaviour at Seaham in spring 1937 was hardly likely to stimulate trust and co-operation with Labour. In that case the CP was the antagonistic party, unrealistically expecting another political party to fund a campaign against itself. Yet, Burdess' behaviour was far from characteristic of the north east CP in the period. In most cases its members made every effort to build co-operation with potential allies.<sup>86</sup>

Though the popular front policy appears to have been accepted and attempts made to implement it, some communist energies were clearly diverted from this task. A problem affecting the CP nation-wide was that the conflict in Spain acted as a distraction from the advocacy of the popular front. In October 1937 the CP Central Committee recognised that half of CP branches had not even attempted to get local labour movement bodies to approach the Labour Party about allowing CP affiliation to it: CP branches were more involved in 'Aid Spain' campaigns and the Left Book Club.<sup>87</sup> The urgent needs of Spain must also have meant that a great

deal of communist energy in the north east was devoted to the various 'Aid Spain' campaigns, many of which did not yield political benefits for the party.

Yet the main problem for the popular front policy was that it was simply not that popular within the wider north east labour movement. There was very little Labour Party support in the region for either the united or the popular fronts. Both, in fact, drew less support and had less of an impact in the region than they did nationally. Worse still, not only was this support low, it appeared to be declining over the period. Though unimpressive, there was more Labour Party support for the Unity Campaign in 1937 than for the popular front campaigns that followed, and the 1938 United Peace Alliance appeared better supported than Cripps' campaign in 1939.<sup>88</sup> The unpopularity of these policies can be partly explained by the same reasons why the CP traditionally had found it difficult to establish itself in the region.<sup>89</sup>

It is clear that, for the majority in the official labour movement, the pressing needs of Republican Spain meant that the conflict acted as a distraction from the popular front rather than an adjunct to it. 'Official' activists' energies were concentrated in 'Aid Spain' activities, which were generally well supported in the north east, 1936-1939. It is noteworthy that the communist-supported Unity Campaign in 1937 could not muster anywhere near the same kind of support that 'Aid Spain' activities had the previous autumn, and this situation did not change. The problem for communists here was that there were outlets for this 'Aid Spain' activity within the official movement, regardless of the national leadership's equivocation on the topic.<sup>90</sup>

Notwithstanding this, many 'Aid Spain' campaigns allowed communists to come into contact with 'official' labour movement activists and this should have led to increased CP influence.<sup>91</sup> Communists worked with Labour Party members and others in some Spanish Medical Aid committees and the Basque Children's Hostel in Tynemouth, for instance. Yet, in the vast majority of these individual organisations, the campaigning message was a humanitarian one, to 'save the innocent starving women and children of Spain', rather than a political one ('save the Republic from fascism'). As the politics of the Spanish situation was downplayed, so the politics of those involved in these campaigns also did not come to the fore. The most striking example of this was the Tyneside foodship campaign of December 1938 to March 1939. It was the largest and most politically diverse 'Aid Spain' campaign in the region, and communists were involved.<sup>92</sup> However, this was at precisely the same time as the CP's membership in the north east was declining. It was no wonder then that Hymie Lee complained to the Central Committee that 'in all the mass activity we are hiding the face of the party. Communists are working everywhere but they don't show that they are communists'. It was also no coincidence that he added 'there is no feeling about the party growing'.<sup>93</sup> Of course, the 'political' demonstrations that the CP mounted for arms to the Republic; the campaigns it helped organise which were framed in explicitly political terms or demanding a change in government policy; the support the Republic received in the pages of the *Daily Worker* and the fact that the CP organised the International Brigades, must have brought the CP recruits and influence.<sup>94</sup> But it seemed that more energies were devoted to humanitarian campaigns that did not, for the very reason that they had a humanitarian basis, yield tangible political benefits.



Could a policy other than the popular front have served the CP better in the north east in this period? Possibly, yes. There was widespread disquiet within the north east over foreign affairs in 1938. In fact, almost the entire 'official' north east labour movement desired an emergency conference of the national labour movement on Spain or the general international situation by mid-1938. More significantly, in June 1938 the NEFTC, Northumberland and Tyneside Federation of Labour Parties and Co-operative Party called for a national labour movement conference 'to formulate *industrial and political action to remove the Chamberlain government*' [my emphasis].<sup>95</sup> This call for industrial direct action was highly significant, coming, as it did, from a region that was normally considered 'moderate'. This call placed the north east far to the left of the national leadership of the movement. However, and unfortunately for the CP, the appeal to Liberals and the middle class in general inherent in the popular front strategy required the party to tone-down its policies and rhetoric. Thus it no longer advocated industrial direct action for political ends, at a time when such a policy would have had a significant resonance in the regional official movement. For a significant section of the official labour movement rank-and-file, the popular front policy was simply 'too Liberal' to have any appeal. Regional disaffection did not lead the official movement into the arms of popular fronters, or the communists, *partly* because the communist policy was now too right wing. This point should not be overemphasised, however. Given the difficult historic constraints that the CP was working under in the region, it is unlikely that it would have emerged to make a direct challenge to Labour's political hegemony. However, a more militant policy attempting to encourage industrial direct action and a more forceful and open *political* presence in the 'Aid Spain' campaigns would surely have at least increased the party's profile, membership and influence. In other words, if the CP had followed a policy that did not involve as many political sacrifices to the desires

of liberals, it would surely have fared better in the north east, and, perhaps, in other Labour-dominated regions of Britain as well.<sup>96</sup>

Finally, there is a third set of reasons for the north east CP's failure which are based on its own self-inflicted internal problems and failings. With all the long-term difficulties for the party, and the problems that the popular front policy posed in the north east, the fact that there remained some residual sectarianism in the north east CP made life even more difficult for the party.<sup>97</sup> There was also some apathy and complacency in the region, which was partly a reason for and also partly a consequence of the north east party's problems. This was recognised at national level and angered the leaders. Discussing the sales of communist pamphlets on agricultural questions in February 1938, Harry Pollitt criticised the district, identifying the north east and Birmingham, as 'the districts where the situation is the least satisfactory'.<sup>98</sup> Even when there was an apparent minor success, it seemed that the North East District contrived to squander it. In December 1937, Dave Springhall reported that membership in Newcastle had 'grown appreciably' in the past eighteen months. However, he complained that almost half of those who had applied to join on the occasions of recent big meetings, and in connection with a 'pageant', were still 'not yet consolidated'. This suggested to Springhall that complacency was 'rife'.<sup>99</sup> The district leadership was largely drawn from the area, which must have been advantageous, though it seemed a strange decision to send George Aitken to comment to the Central Committee on developments in the region at an important moment (November 1936), when he had only been in the district 'a month or two'.<sup>100</sup>

It was clear by March 1939 that many of these problems had not been dealt with. At a Central Committee meeting, Hymie Lee referred to the apathy in the district

and the ‘difficulty in getting branches to take up popular issues facing the people’.<sup>101</sup> He also noted the reluctance inside the party to discuss its organisation and growth and the ‘disparity between membership and influence’ in the party. On the question of the development of new members in the district he had ‘found that the great majority of the work is being done by comparatively new people’.

Finally, Lee, too, identified ‘a great deal of sectarianism in the Party’. Implicitly, Lee accepted part-responsibility for many of these failures, though the central leadership were not blameless, as far as he was concerned, in this litany of failures. Outlining the problems of small CP districts, Lee suggested that these could be overcome by introducing ‘more political life’ into the party. Here, the leadership had been lacking: the North East District had only received two visits from Central Committee members since the 1938 Congress and during one of these, the visitors had spoken at a meeting and ‘left immediately after it’.<sup>102</sup> Whatever the reasons for the CP’s failure, its experience in the north east 1935-1939 certainly does not suggest that the popular front period was the ‘the most fruitful period in the history of [...] the Communist Party in particular’.<sup>103</sup> If this period truly was ‘fruitful’, the lean times must have been unimaginably barren.

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\* I would like to thank Peter Mates for his comments on an earlier draft of this article.

<sup>1</sup> The Communist Party North East District included what is today Northumberland, Tyne and Wear, County Durham, Teesside and Cumbria. Events in Cumbria have been disregarded for the purposes of this article. In some primary sources and secondary works, ‘Tyneside District’ or the ‘North East coast’ are referred to. These were different names for the same geographical area.

<sup>2</sup> See Tom Buchanan, *Britain and the Spanish Civil War* (Cambridge, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> J. Fyrth, ‘Introduction: In the Thirties’, in J. Fyrth (ed.), *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (1985) p.15. [Place of publication is London unless otherwise stated].

<sup>4</sup> *Sunday Sun*, 18 July 1937.

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<sup>5</sup> The north east Young Communist League (YCL) reflected this weakness almost exactly. In June 1938, the north east YCL had 155 members in six branches, 3.4 percent of the total national membership of 4,602. Manchester Labour History Archive [hereafter MLHA], CP Minutes, Reel No.3., CP Central Committee Fifteenth Congress Report, p.26.

<sup>6</sup> There were 100 delegates representing 550 members at the CP North East District Congress in August 1938. Yet a central CP document listed the 'North East Coast' membership at the time as 535, a small discrepancy. Unfortunately, there are no district membership figures for 1935-7. *North Mail*, 29 August 1938 and MLHA, CP Minutes, Reel No.3, CP Central Committee, Fifteenth Congress Report, p.30.

<sup>7</sup> J.F. Clarke & J.W. Leonard, *The General Strike 1926 Handbook* (Newcastle, 1971) p.21.

Of course, membership figures could be deceptive and did not necessarily reflect the levels of activism of those involved nor their influence.

<sup>8</sup> Johnny Walsh was, however, eventually able to join the YCL, after a promise to his brother Sam who had died fighting with the International Brigade in Spain. MLHA, CP/CENT/PERS/7/07, Johnny Walsh autobiographical note.

<sup>9</sup> E. Wilkinson, *The Town That Was Murdered* (London, 1939) p.194.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the town's Communist youth section was larger in the late thirties. This was largely thanks to Barry Sparke, who had helped to form a Jarrow Labour League of Youth (LLY) branch in 1939. He soon became disillusioned with the lack of autonomy the LLY had and, with fourteen others, joined the YCL. Barry Sparke (b. Jarrow, 1923; name altered), Tape-recorded Interview with Lewis Mates, 5 February 1999.

<sup>11</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 7 January 1937.

<sup>12</sup> The most prominent catholic in Gateshead LP&TC was Norman McCretton, an outspoken critic of Labour policy on Spain. Lewis H. Mates, 'The United Front and the Popular Front in the North East of England, 1936-1939', (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Newcastle University, 2002), pp.79-108.

<sup>13</sup> Barry was moved between protestant and catholic schools 'depending on who was winning' which had the presumably undesired effect of turning him into an atheist. There were several other examples of north east Communists who had working class catholic parents including Louis McMahon from Gateshead, Lily O'Byrne of Consett, and Johnny and Sam Walsh of Newcastle. Barry Sparke Interview; MLHA, CP/CENT/PERS/4/07; -PERS/5/05, -PERS/7/07, Louis McMahon, Lily O'Byrne and Johnny Walsh autobiographical notes.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Graham (b. Sunderland, 1911), Tape-recorded Interview with Lewis Mates, 21 October 1994.

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<sup>15</sup> Not all of the Sunderland contingent were CP members.

<sup>16</sup> Wilkinson, *Town That Was Murdered*, p.194. Some authorities have taken this as true. J. Stevenson & C. Cook, *Britain in the Depression. Society and Politics, 1929-1939* (Harlow, second edition, 1994) p.153; J. Jupp, *The Radical Left in Britain, 1931-1941* (1982) p.229.

<sup>17</sup> Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.72-6.

<sup>18</sup> Barry Sparke Interview. Sparke was certainly right about Rounce as there is a file on him in the CP archives. A woodworker/joiner, Rounce joined the CP in 1937, and was a member of Jarrow LP&TC executive by the time he was elected onto the council at a by-election in April 1938. Indeed, at the time, the *Daily Worker* blew his cover. It had to announce in January 1938 that its description of Rounce as a Communist municipal election candidate in a previous edition was an 'error' and that he was, in fact, a Labour candidate and not a CP member. The 'error' was that Rounce's true political affiliation had been published in the Communist national daily. MLHA, CP/CENT/PERS/6/04, William E. Rounce autobiographical note; *North Mail*, 15 January 1938; 25 January 1938; 14 April 1938. See Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.72-6.

<sup>19</sup> Jarrow LP&TC claimed that it was not involved with Communists, neither did it have any Communist delegates. Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.62 , 73.

<sup>20</sup> These included supporting a united front NUWM demonstration in early 1937, a call for the rescinding of the anti-Communist 'Black Circulars' and the popular front initiatives of 1938-9. Ibid., pp.120,143,162,166 and 195.

<sup>21</sup> Ellen Wilkinson, an ex-Communist, was the most left wing Labour MP in the region, though her political position was rapidly moderating in this period. Ibid., pp.59-60 195.

<sup>22</sup> Husband and wife Emmie and Steve Lawther were both prominently involved in the Communist-inspired Minority Movement in the early thirties. Both remained Labour Party activists in the late thirties and Steve was a Labour county councillor (until 1937). These were all examples of people who had been 'fellow travellers' for some time (at least since the time of the general strike), and had clearly embraced the popular front strategy from 1935, which demanded a significantly different approach to the 'class against class' period that immediately preceded it. It is safe to say that these individuals took their cue from the CP, which is confirmed by what they did after September 1939. Andy and Steve Lawther seemed true 'fellow travellers' as they supported the CP's opposition to the 'imperialist' Second World War in October 1939 and publicly attacked their brother Will, who supported the war efforts and rejected the CP 'line'. Bolton, who had spent a short period in the CP in 1928 before returning to the Labour

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Party, supported the Soviet invasion of Finland in 1942. With other Durham miners, he circulated a leaflet attacking Will Lawther for his call for aid to help Finland fight the Soviet invasion. TUC general secretary Walter Citrine claimed that the leaflet was 'almost identical with Communist propaganda circulating at this time'. Trade Films Collection, Gateshead, *Circular: An Appeal to the Miners of Durham*; MLHA, CP/DUTT/05/11, letters Will to Andy Lawther, 19 October 1939, Herby and Joe to Will Lawther, 23 October 1939 and Andy, Steve and Robert Lawther to Will Lawther, 4 November 1939; *The Worker*, 4 July 1930; 17 October 1930; *North Mail*, 16 October 1939; *Consett Chronicle*, 2 April 1942.

<sup>23</sup> Another important Blaydon Labour Party member, miner Jim Stephenson, was possibly more influenced by the ILP, of which he had been a member until 1935. He was not obviously involved in any of the popular front agitation, which the ILP also opposed. Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.53,185,211.

<sup>24</sup> Blaydon DLP actively supported the United Peace Alliance in 1938. Bolton, Emmie and Steve Lawther (then secretary of Blaydon Labour Party) all supported Cripps' popular front campaign in 1939. Ibid., pp.162-3,170,179,182,200,204-6,211.

<sup>25</sup> Blaydon Trades Council, too, was not left wing, due to the influence of its secretary Edward Colgan who, as a catholic, was both anti-Communist and a critic of Labour's policy on the Spanish Civil War. Ibid., pp.81,92,94,97-99,106-7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp.62-3.

<sup>27</sup> Like Rounce, Aisbitt was a woodworker and Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers (ASW) member. Though also a Newcastle Labour councillor, Aisbitt's real and extensive influence came from his position of power in Newcastle Trades Council which he helped to re-organise and on which he served for forty years. In the twenties, Aisbitt had been active in the Socialist Labour Party, Labour Party and trade unions. Joining the newly-formed Newcastle CP, he was soon a member of the CP's Tyneside District Committee. MLHA, CP/CENT/PERS/1/01, Tom Aisbitt biography by Horace Green.

<sup>28</sup> Newcastle Trades Council supported the 1936 Hunger March and later NUWM initiatives, the 1937 Unity Campaign and Cripps in 1939. There is no real indication of the exceptionally left wing nature of Newcastle Trades Council (in the late thirties, at least) in a short book on the topic.

Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.35,112-3,204; J.F. Clarke & T.P. McDermott, *Newcastle and District Trades Council, 1873-1973. Centenary History* (Newcastle, 1973).

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<sup>29</sup> In fact, with a membership of 15,472 (seventy-seven affiliated trade union branches in 1937), Newcastle Trades Council comprised about half the entire NEFTC. The next largest affiliate was Blyth Trades Council with 4,440 members, less than a third of Newcastle Trades Council. In fact, Newcastle Trades Council could have been even bigger as a total of forty-four other trade union branches could have been, but were not, affiliated to it. Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.55,68.

<sup>30</sup> In June 1936 the NEFTC reiterated its determination to avoid the possibility of participating in activity with Communists on 'peace' issues. The TJPC did have Communists involved in it, as well as Labour left wingers and members of Lloyd George's Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction (CAPR). Though very active, it had only limited influence within the wider labour movement, partly because of suspicions like these. The CAPR people, were, with a couple of exceptions, the only 'liberals' engaging in popular front activity with Communists and the Labour left in the region in this period. Ibid., pp.35-40,112-13,121,203,222-231.

<sup>31</sup> The NUWM was relatively inactive from Spring 1937, as energies were increasingly diverted to foreign policy issues.

Ibid., pp.121, 162,164,168,198-9,205,207,213.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp.121,126,141-3.

<sup>33</sup> In the autumn, Labour-controlled Gateshead council refused to support the NUWM Hunger March. Labour Party members were suspicious that both the NUWM and the popular front TJPC were merely Communist 'off-shoots'. Ibid., pp.30,39,109-113,115-6,132.

<sup>34</sup> Thus, though members of both organisations, they would actually have been representing the Socialist League rather than the Labour Party, but chose to depict themselves as Labour Party delegates as this carried more weight.

<sup>35</sup> See M. Callcott (ed.), *A Pilgrimage of Grace. The Diaries of Ruth Dodds, 1905-1974* (Whitley Bay, 1995).

<sup>36</sup> Mary Gunn was another person who appeared to be on the left in Gateshead Labour Party. Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.30, 115,167-9.

<sup>37</sup> The CP used this internal division to attempt to further its relations with the Labour Party by expressing appreciation at Kelly's positive remarks, but disassociating itself from Kelly's criticisms of Gateshead Labour Party. Ibid., pp.69-70.

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<sup>38</sup> A single article in the party's newspaper was all the positive evidence there was of support for Cripps, and its unnamed author seemed to have been as much, or more, opposed to the leadership's repression of Cripps than a positive supporter of his proposals. Ibid., pp.115-6,207-8.

<sup>39</sup> The sections were Lemington ward committee of Newburn and District LLP, Whitley Bay LLP and Bedlington LLP, in addition to Trevelyan's own LLP, Cambo. Ibid., pp.46, 59-60,114-5.

<sup>40</sup> Though initially elected as delegate to the 1939 Labour conference, when expelled by the national Labour Party, he was quickly replaced. Ibid., pp.167,170,192-4.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp.24-5,34,161,174,213.

<sup>42</sup> B.E. Naylor, 'Ramsay Macdonald and Seaham Labour Politics', *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, 15 (1981), p.31.

<sup>43</sup> Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.56,123-4. The victorious Labour candidates received between 767 and 676 votes. Burdess was well behind, with only 392 votes. *Newcastle Journal*, 17 March 1937; *Daily Worker*, 20 March 1937.

<sup>44</sup> Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.24,40,118-9,165-6,170,195.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp.26-7,36,60,111,117,130,133,161.

<sup>46</sup> This was curious given that recent election results in the constituency suggested that the presence of three parties helped Labour and that Liberal voters would vote Conservative rather than Labour if there was no Liberal candidate. It appeared that Labour had more to lose than to gain with an electoral alliance with Liberals in South Shields. Ibid., pp.36,168-9,202-3.

<sup>47</sup> Labour never had more than four councillors on Tynemouth council in the thirties and the CP came close to winning a seat several times in this period. The closest was in 1934 when the Communist M.W. Harrison, standing again in Central ward, came within twelve votes of taking the seat. Ibid., pp.31-2.

<sup>48</sup> Although admitting ignorance of the Black Circular, Tynemouth Trades Council assured head office that they refused entry to Communists. Through its delegate, P. Ovington, Tynemouth Trades Council appeared an anti-Communist force in the NEFTC, especially when Ovington chaired the NEFTC in 1936. (He seconded Blaydon Trades Council's delegate Colgan's anti-Communist resolution in an NEFTC meeting in March 1936). Unlike the Labour Party, Tynemouth Trades Council did not support Cripps. Ibid., pp.40,62,205.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp.203,205-6.

<sup>50</sup> Communist trade unionists themselves often avoided 'politics': reports of the CP districts to the leadership on their industrial activity revealed a tendency to by-pass political questions. Ibid., pp.46-7.



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<sup>51</sup> The CP itself was not mentioned in the advert. Gateshead Public Library [hereafter GPL], L331.88, *DMA Monthly Journal*, 8, November 1938; *Blaydon Courier*, 3 June 1938. Whilst Gateshead Public Library has several numbers of the *DMA Monthly Journal*, it does not have a complete set. In this period it only has numbers 8 and 12 (March 1939).

<sup>52</sup> Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.26-7,59-60,174.

<sup>53</sup> In the same issue was a Mayday message to miners by Will Pearson, who called for the development of a 'militant working class policy' against fascism in Britain. An editorial criticised Will Lawther's assertion of the need to defend the conditions the miners already had rather than make fresh demands. Left wing miner George Harvey sent his best wishes to the editorial board. GPL, L331.88, *Durham Mineworker*, 2, May 1934.

<sup>54</sup> Strictly speaking, the need to appease the middle-class inherent in the popular front strategy meant that the CP nationally no longer advocated industrial direct action. However, the implications of the popular front policy did not completely filter down to grass roots, and previous, more militant, attitudes remained in the minds of many Communists. Thus Communist-controlled lodges were more likely to have voted for this resolution than not: the lodge that proposed it, Boldon, was a militant lodge with Communist George Reay holding an important position. *Shields Gazette*, 2 March 1937; Durham Area Miners' Office, Redhills, DMA Council Programmes and Minutes, 1937, council meeting, 13 March 1937 and Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.28-9, 268-70.

<sup>55</sup> Pigford was president of New Herrington Lodge and probably a Communist or a sympathiser. He spoke at a CP meeting with John Strachey at Dawdon in September 1936 (at which Burdess presided). Relatively high-profile in the DMA, he was a member of the DMA delegation to Russia in autumn 1936. *Sunderland Echo*, 15 September 1936; 1 October 1936 and 26 October 1936.

<sup>56</sup> Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.23-4,58-9, 117.

<sup>57</sup> After asking lodges to table resolutions on the subject at council, the executive then deferred all business to the following council meeting, which happened to be scheduled for a week *after* the march was due to start. Worse, a lodge attempt to move an emergency resolution of DMA support for the march was ruled 'out of order' by the chairperson.

*Ibid.*, pp.26-9,34,50.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.117,150-6.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.160-2,194-6,204,211,219.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p.55. In 1938, the members of the CP North East District Committee were councillor Jim Ancrum, councillor T.A. Richardson, Charles R. Woods, William Allan, George A. Reay, William Masheder, George Short and R. Smith. George Aitken was north east representative on the CP Central Committee from September to December 1936 when he went to Spain. William Allan became a member of the Central Committee in May 1937 when it was reformed with an extra ten members (giving a total of twenty-seven members.) In March 1938 Charlie Woods stood in for Allan. After March 1939 Hymie Lee was the north east representative on the Central Committee. Newcastle Public Library, L329.4, North East District CP Pamphlet, *The North East Marches On* (Newcastle, n.d., 1938?); MLHA, Reel No.s 4 and 7, CP Central Committee Minutes, 10 November 1936, 28 May 1937, 5 March 1938, 19 March 1939.

<sup>61</sup> Apart from Burdess and Reay, Communists operating in the executives of DMA lodges included George Cole (Thrislington), George Lumley (Ryhope) and William Todd (Dean and Chapter). Two officials in Chopwell were also Communists, though its epithet of 'Little Moscow' appeared in some ways undeserved. 'Fellow travellers' and other left wingers in official lodge positions included Henry Bolton (Chopwell checkweighman); George Harvey (Follonsby checkweighman and lodge secretary and a Labour councillor); Andy Lawther (elected checkweighman at Spen in December 1937 and lodge compensation secretary in 1938); Will Pearson (Marsden checkweighman and Labour member of South Shields municipality) and Jim Stephenson (Blaydon checkweighman and Labour councillor).

*Sunday Sun*, 5 December 1937; *North Mail*, 5 July 1938.

<sup>62</sup> Ancrum apparently received thirty-nine votes, his opponent, fifty-three. Presumably every lodge member had a vote, in which case these figures were remarkably low. *The Worker*, 16 May 1931.

<sup>63</sup> MLHA, CP/CENT/PERS/6/07, George Short autobiographical note.

<sup>64</sup> MLHA, CP/CENT/PERS/8/01, Charlie Woods autobiographical note.

<sup>65</sup> Aisbitt was charged, along with George Harvey, for libel against DMA leader John Wilson in 1912. MLHA, CP/CENT/PERS/1/01, Tom Aisbitt biography by Horace Green.

<sup>66</sup> Garside cited a claim that miners constituted ninety percent of the District CP's membership in March 1928. Clearly, by the late 1930s this occupational domination had evaporated, perhaps because the CP had recruited far more from the middle classes after 1935.

W.R. Garside, *The Durham Miners, 1919-1960* (1971) p.240; Warwick Modern Records Centre [hereafter WMRC], 292/946/34, Lists of International Brigade Volunteers (including trade union affiliations); Marx Memorial Library [hereafter MML], 21/C/2, 39A/29; MML, D7/A/2, Lists of

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International Brigade Volunteers (including political affiliations); Imperial War Museum Sound Archive, 16217/1, Tom Chivers Interview.

<sup>67</sup> The NMA also supported the NUWM campaign of August 1939. Burradon Lodge of the NMA was represented at a United Peace Alliance conference in 1938. There were also National Union of Railwaymen delegates on the platform at this Unity Campaign meeting and Gateshead No.1 NUR branch supported Cripps in 1939. Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', passim.

<sup>68</sup> One unnamed NUGMW branch was represented at a united front conference organised by the Socialist League branch in late July 1936 and there were two NUGMW branches on the North East Hunger March Committee in autumn 1936. Stanley NUGMW branch supported Cripps in 1939 and Newcastle NUGMW branch was chaired by R.G. Purcell, who was TJPC secretary in 1936 and secretary of Newcastle CAPR branch by December 1938. Ibid., pp.25,28,35,203-4,214.

<sup>69</sup> In August 1939 the district AEU supported an NUWM campaign. The district secretary Jack Bowman supported the United Peace Alliance conference in 1938, but it later seemed this was due to a misunderstanding. The only identifiably left-influenced branch was Newcastle No.13, which supported Cripps in 1939. Ibid., pp.23, 112-3,121,135,167-8,201-5.

<sup>70</sup> Like many other north east Communists, Robson had started work as a miner in Cambois pit, but became a seaman in 1912. MLHA, CP/IND/KLUG/11/02, Alex Robson autobiographical note; WMRC, 175/6/BR/31, North Shields NUS Branch Minutes and Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.125,274.

<sup>71</sup> *Sunday Sun*, 18 July 1937.

<sup>72</sup> Elliott was an unemployed miner even in 1930. He led the Blyth contingent of the Hunger March in 1936. Aisbtt chaired Newcastle No.7 ASW branch. *The Worker*, 25 July 1930; Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp. 30-1,112,122-5,133,169. At least fourteen of the thirty-four from the region killed in the International Brigade were Communists. As they were some of the most dedicated and active CP members, their loss must have had a seriously deleterious effect on the party in a region where it was already debilitated.

<sup>73</sup> Rust noted significant membership increases in London (by 1,000) the Midlands, Eastern Counties and Hampshire and smaller increases in South Wales and Lancashire. Indeed, so low was north east CP membership that it was exceeded by that of certain towns by themselves: Glasgow had 1,000 plus members, Manchester 650 and Birmingham 500 plus.

CP Central Committee Minutes, 19 March 1939, p.19.

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.22.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>76</sup> Jupp, *Radical Left*, p.178.

<sup>77</sup> D.L. Murphy, 'The Communist Party of Great Britain and its Struggle Against Fascism, 1933-9', (unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Huddersfield University, 1999), pp.391-392.

<sup>78</sup> Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.56 and 103-8.

<sup>79</sup> In contrast, the report Aitken then gave, on advances in co-operation with Labour, was positive.

CP Central Committee Meeting Minutes, 10 November 1936.

<sup>80</sup> Fenner Brockway, *The Workers Front* (1938), pp.196-7.

<sup>81</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 5 July 1937.

<sup>82</sup> Thus, when Yarwood, for example, attacked the CP in July 1937 he made no mention in his long tirade of the Show Trials. The only apparent north east Trotskyists in the period, in South Shields, attacked the CP publicly but made nothing of the Show Trials to reinforce their critique. Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.146-8.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp.118,140.

<sup>84</sup> However, Felling Trades Council was not even ideologically committed to co-operation with Communists.

Ibid., pp.25-6,61.

<sup>85</sup> *Newcastle Journal*, 5 July 1937.

<sup>86</sup> By spring 1939, even the CP appeared to have forgotten about attempting to encourage its popular front policy by not standing candidates against Labour where the right might benefit (in Morpeth, at least). Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.124,129.

<sup>87</sup> Several Left Book Club groups emerged in the north east after it was established by Victor Gollancz in March 1936. As early as November 1936, Aitken thought that the CP could develop the 'people's front' through Left Book Club circles which 'can draw in many elements'. In this sense then the Left Book Club may have had an un-measurable political effect and provided some recruits to the CP, as most of the books the group dealt with supported the Communist line to a greater or lesser extent. Yet, however large and popular the Left Book Club was in the region, it still could not compete in terms of numbers and political influence with a trade union, for instance. Though the Left Book Club must have aided the CP, it could not provide the political muscle that the party needed. Ibid., pp.47-50 and 150.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., pp.109-221.

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<sup>89</sup> There were other reasons too, of course. See *Ibid.*, pp.177-191,214-221.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p116.

<sup>91</sup> It is, of course, debatable whether Communist involvement in these campaigns constituted part of its 'popular front' strategy or not. What is clear is that the strategy, if Communists were intentionally attempting to implement it at grass roots level, appears to have been applied in very different ways in various campaigns and different geographical areas. *Ibid.*, pp.268-70.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.241-276.

<sup>93</sup> CP Central Committee Minutes, 19 March 1939, p.22.

<sup>94</sup> Though being an International Brigade member gave some Communists access to some Labour platforms, the individuals involved were never billed as Communists and it is quite likely that many in the audience would not have known that they *were* Communists. For this and other reasons, the political importance of the International Brigades in influencing attitudes in the official labour movement should not be overstated. Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.133-8.

<sup>95</sup> *North Mail*, 20 June 1938.

<sup>96</sup> To 'On saying that, the 'class against class' policy appeared to have been even more disastrous in the region. A letter from Walter Tapsell of the British CP in August 1931 (and for a copy of which I am indebted to Dr Gidon Cohen), reveals that the north east district had 200 members in December 1929 and only 89 by July 1931. A policy somewhere between the two; militant, but attempting to encourage co-operation with anti-capitalists, might well have yielded dividends. Russian Centre for the Preservation and Study of Historical Documents, Moscow, 495/100/736/121, Walter Tapsell to Comrades, 'Organisational Situation of the Party', 15 August 1931.

<sup>97</sup> Mates, 'United Front and Popular Front', pp.143-4.

<sup>98</sup> The 'North East Coast' had, apparently, sold six pamphlets on 'prices' and eighteen on 'milk'. Pollitt did not choose to shame his Birmingham comrades in the same way. CP Central Committee Minutes, 5/2/38, MLHA, CP Minutes, Reel No.7.

<sup>99</sup> MLHA, CP Minutes, Reel No.4, CP Central Committee Minutes, 8 December 1937.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 10 November 1936.

<sup>101</sup> Though, curiously, he went on to remark that north east Communists were 'working everywhere' in all the 'mass activity'. CP Central Committee Minutes, 19 March 1939, p.22.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, There were CP meetings at Dawdon and Murton in September 1936. A large audience saw another leading Communist, Palme Dutt, speak at a meeting in Newcastle in March 1937. In March 1938

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there was a CP meeting at Newcastle City Hall, with Pollitt and Communist MP Willie Gallacher as the main speakers. *Durham Chronicle*, 18 September 1936; *North Mail*, 1 March 1937, 21 March 1938.

<sup>103</sup> Fyrth, *Fascism*, p.15.